

MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM



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*****ADVISORY – Important Information*****

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TO: School Nurses, School Based Health Centers, Daycare Centers, Head Start, All Healthcare, Public Health-Required, PHN, RRCs

FROM: Dora Anne Mills, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Director

SUBJECT: Update on Norovirus Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in Maine

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Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC)
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Update on Norovirus Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in Maine

During December 1, 2008 – February 20, 2009, Maine CDC has investigated 28 confirmed or suspected norovirus gastroenteritis outbreaks from counties across the state. The majority of outbreaks reported occurred in long term care facilities or assisted living centers (23); however outbreaks have also occurred at acute care facilities (3), schools (1), and office settings (1). Norovirus infections typically increase during the winter months, and Maine CDC routinely receives reports of suspected norovirus outbreaks each year. Surveillance data suggests that norovirus circulation is more widespread this year. Public health partners are encouraged to consider norovirus when assessing clusters of gastroenteritis and to act promptly to prevent the spread of illness.

Background: Norovirus infections are characterized by the abrupt onset of gastrointestinal symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramping. It is highly contagious and is transmitted in stool and vomitus. Exposure can result through direct contact with a person who is ill, by consuming food or liquids that are prepared or handled by an ill person, and through contact with surfaces or objects contaminated by vomitus or stool. The virus can persist on surfaces for prolonged periods at a wide range of temperatures.

Recommendations: In outbreaks and clusters of illness, diagnosis should be confirmed by PCR testing of stool specimens at the Maine CDC's Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL). Stools should also be tested for bacterial pathogens through private laboratories. Information on specimen collection and handling can be found at: http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/etl/micro/submitting_samples.htm To report a possible institutional outbreak and to obtain epidemiologic support for norovirus stool testing, call 1-800-821-5821.

Patients with acute gastroenteritis should be informed that infection can easily spread from person to person, and that both stool and vomitus are infectious. Patients and their close contacts should wash their hands frequently with soap and water, and should be aware that viral shedding will continue for at least 2 days after symptoms have resolved. Infected individuals should refrain from food handling, patient or child care, and recreational water activity, until 2 days after symptoms have resolved.

- **Food Workers:** Food preparers and food handlers with gastroenteritis should not work until at least 2 days after their symptoms resolve. Because the virus continues to be present in the stool for as long as 2 to 3 weeks after the person feels better, strict hand washing after using the bathroom and before handling food items is important to prevent the spread of this virus. Food handlers who were recently sick may be given different duties so that they do not have to handle food.
- **Health Care Facilities:** Transmission of norovirus infection to and from patients and staff occurs readily, and cases of gastroenteritis should be reported to infection control professionals as soon as possible. Contact Precautions should be used when caring for diapered or incontinent persons during outbreaks in a facility, and when there is the possibility of splashes that might lead to contamination of clothing. Persons cleaning areas contaminated with vomitus or feces should wear surgical masks. Patients with suspected norovirus may be placed in private rooms or cohorted. Increasing environmental disinfection will decrease the presence of the virus on surfaces. Health care facilities may consider limiting admissions and discharges, as well as elective procedures until outbreaks subside or until patients can be appropriately cohorted.
- **Schools and child care facilities:** Alert parents when an outbreak is suspected and request that ill children remain at home during the symptomatic period and at least 48 hours after last symptoms.

For More Information:

- Contact the Maine CDC at 1-800 821-5821
- General information <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus-qa.htm> and http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/disease_specific_information.htm
- Health Care Facilities: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dhqp/id_norovirusFS.html
Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/etl/divisions.htm>